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ABSTRACT

The IALAC (I Am Loveable and Capable) story presents one day in the life of 14 year old Randy, who puts on his IALAC sign each morning and sets out to face the world. As "put-downs" occur at home and at school, little pieces of his sign are torn away; by the end of the day very little of the sign remains. This allegory is a tool for humanistic education which can be used by a teacher, clergyman, student, or any group leader who is concerned with making people feel loveable and capable. It deals with the "put-down," an American idiosyncrasy, which inhibits humanistic values. The content of the IALAC story can be modified to fit specific groups or dramatized for student participation. (JH)

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I Am Loveable and Clean

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A Modern Allegory on the Classical Put-Down

BY SIDNEY SIMON

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The IALAC Story
by Sidney B. Simon, Ed.D.
Illustrations by Patricia Ryan

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With deepest thanks to
Merrill Harmin
and
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who over the years
have added important nuances
to this story.

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE EDUCATION

Everyone I know wears one of these signs. Oh, you can't see it, of course, but it's still there, and there's no way I know of that you can take it off. The letters stand for some very important words. The first word is *I*. Me. It's a very important word both to me and, believe it or not, to others. The second letter stands for *Am*, and the third for *Loveable*. *I Am Loveable*. Of course I am, and what's more *I Am Capable*. Yes, I Am Loveable And Capable. And I want everyone to know it. That's why I'm wearing this sign. Everyone needs a sign like this one because we all want people to think of us as being loveable and capable. So many of the things we do every day reflect this need as we search out ways to prove it to ourselves and to others.

Let me tell you a story about a fourteen year old boy named Randy from Central City . . .

The sun is just starting to poke its way through the half-open curtains into Randy's room. The alarm clock goes off like a time bomb, and Randy fishes around to find the magic button that'll turn off its blaring ring. He finally succeeds and turns over, snuggling deeper into his comfortable bed. According to Randy's built-in clock about a minute passes by, but actually it's been a little longer. There above him stands his mother rousing him with that Monday morning prodding that only mothers have mastered.

"Randall Edward, it's time to get up. If you miss your bus, you're going to walk. Now move!"

Randy reluctantly climbs out of bed and heads for the bathroom. On his way, a little piece of his IALAC sign falls onto the carpet. Randy doesn't really notice. It's happened before.

Randy's little sister Robin is a pleasant enough little girl, except to Randy. She seems to delight in making his life miserable. Just as Randy reaches the bathroom door, Robin, her hair in curlers, hairbrush in tow, scoots past him into the bathroom, shouting she'll be late if she doesn't hurry. The door slams and the lock is thrown. Randy waits . . . and waits . . . and waits outside the door, occasionally knocking and shouting for her to hurry up. Bathrooms, unfortunately, seem to be sanctuaries for little brothers and sisters, and Randy manages to get in after a ten minute delay. Robin flits by him as if he doesn't exist, and he has a desperate urge to trip her. He succeeds in spite of her screams for help. His father walks out of the bedroom across the hall and gives him an accusing look.

"Randy, watch your temper and leave your little sister alone!"

Later, Randy comes downstairs for breakfast. As he walks into the kitchen, he smiles at his mom and dad.

"Hi, mom, dad, what's for breakfast?" he asks cheerily.

"Look, Randy, we're all running late this morning, so just eat what I put down in front of you," his mother responds.

Randy can understand that everyone is in a hurry, but that doesn't mean that they have to take it out on him. His feelings are relieved slightly when what his mother does put down in front of him turns out to be his favorite—

Crunchy Granola.

Just as Randy gulps down his last spoonful of cereal, he sees the school bus whiz down the street to the bus stop at the corner. Randy grabs his jacket and books and runs out the back door. He just makes it to the end of the block when the bus pulls away.

"I know that driver saw me through his rear-view mirror. Why the heck didn't he stop? I guess I'll just have to hitch to school this morning. I sure hope I'm not late."

He starts off down the street. Traffic is very heavy, and Randy's pretty sure that he won't have any trouble finding a ride. He walks along the sidewalk, hoping to see someone he recognizes. A late model Chevy soon pulls up beside him. Its driver, Gary Dunn, is a math teacher at Central High. Randy doesn't know him very well; he's seen him in the hall once or twice.

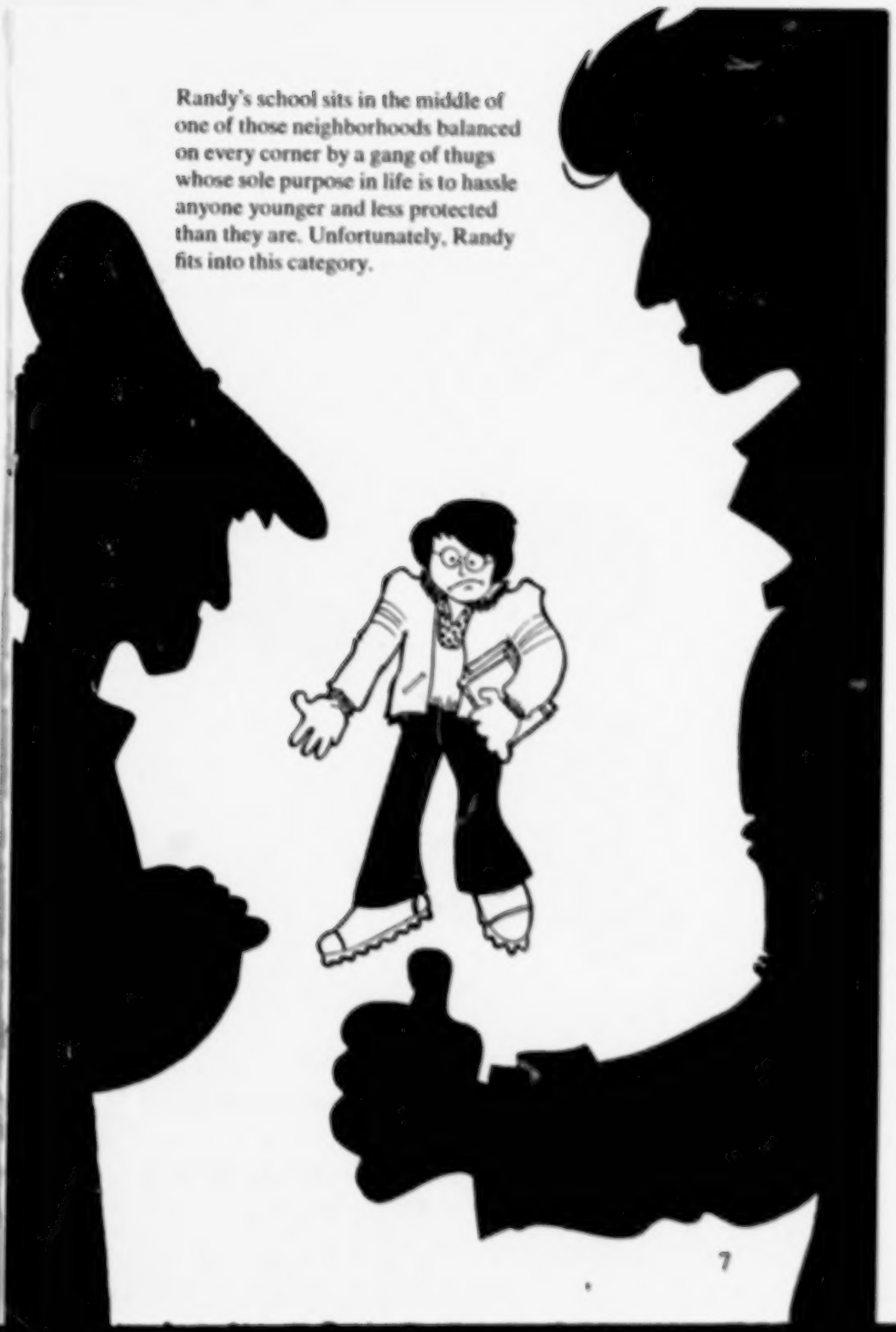
"Do you want a lift?"

"Yeah, thanks, Mr. Dunn. I missed my bus."

"Well, hop in; it's getting late."

They talk about football the rest of the way to school, and Mr. Dunn lets Randy off at the corner and goes to find a parking place.

Randy's school sits in the middle of one of those neighborhoods balanced on every corner by a gang of thugs whose sole purpose in life is to hassle anyone younger and less protected than they are. Unfortunately, Randy fits into this category.



Already, Randy can sense that there's going to be trouble. His walk to school becomes even more hurried when he realizes that he's being followed. One of the guys behind him makes a quick move and muscles him over with a poke and a jeering, "Excuse me." His two cohorts follow suit until Randy is surrounded. Randy can usually hold his own on a one-to-one basis, but three adversaries are a little more than he bargained for. He considers trying out the kung-fu he's been practicing in front of the mirror but then realizes that this is for real. Instead, he chickens out.

"Look, I don't even know you guys. What do you want?"

"Nothing, just trying to get by, that's all."

"Well then, after you," he gestures gallantly, feeling like a fool but hoping they'll think it's funny.

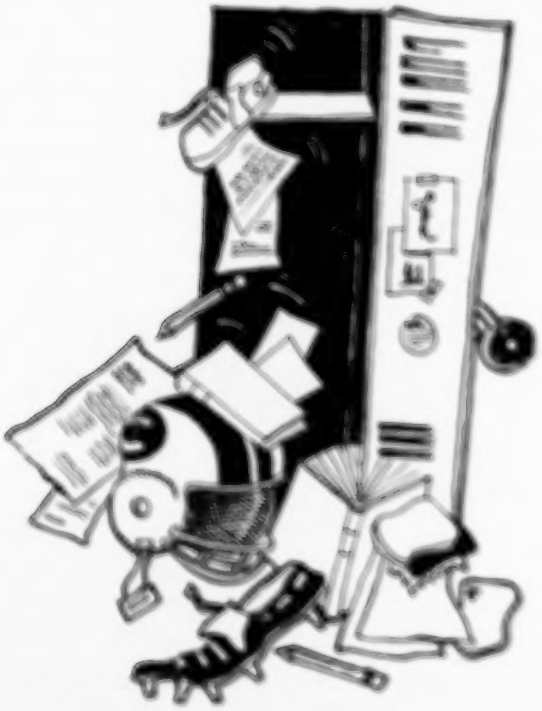
After the trio passes by, one of them pivots around and kicks Randy in the rear-end. The blow sends him flying across the sidewalk, and a large piece of his IALAC sign falls off.

It lay on the sidewalk along with his scattered books and homework assignments. The other boys all double over in hysterical laughter, and Randy almost wishes he'd taken them on instead.

He scoops up his belongings, including his Spanish assignments which one of the guys managed to step on. Randy starts off for school again and finally reaches the front steps. Upset by his humiliation and in an urgent race with the bell, his legs stretch to reach three steps in a single bound. Not quite superman, he grimaces with pain as he smashes his shin against the sharp edge of the top step. The front door seems very far away, and he sits down on the step and rubs his sore leg. By sitting there, he's caused a minor traffic jam. Other last minute arrivals sidestep him as they rush to make it to homeroom before the late bell rings.

So far, Randy's day has been far from perfect. As a matter of fact, since the early morning, one bad thing has followed another, snowballing until Randy seems about to be buried in an avalanche of problems.

Randy follows the crowd into school and limps over to his locker. 29-34-14—the locker clicks open—and wouldn't you know it, his locker partner Greg's football gear and books and notebooks, and gym shoes and old sandwiches that were jammed into the top shelf come tumbling down in a barrage to the floor.



Randy scoops them up and jams them right back into the locker. Randy knows he's going to be late, and he doesn't even have to check his watch because the late bell clangs right on schedule. To make matters worse, his homeroom is at the other end of the building, right past the principal's office. By the way, the principal prides himself on the fact that the door is always open to allow easy access to any student who has a problem or just wants to chat. Unfortunately, the open office also serves as an unparalleled look-out point for students who are in the halls when they should be in class.

Randy dashes to his homeroom, just missing a run-in with Dr. Shepherd who is too engrossed in a conversation with the student council president to notice Randy's stealthy speed. Having passed this gauntlet, Randy breathes a sigh of relief and quietly opens the door to room 107, hoping his late entrance goes unnoticed.

"Now, do you all understand that tomorrow classes will be on the B schedule and lunch will be on the A schedule, so we'll have time for the assembly at 2:30?" Mrs. Monroe, the homeroom teacher, asks the class as Randy tiptoes to his seat. The class nods in unison, and she begins to take the roll. She goes quickly through the list, and after Randy hears himself shout, "Here," he sees her change from a black ballpoint to a red felt tip pen that she uses to indicate who's come in late.

Randy was hoping that she'd let it go this time. The rest of homeroom proves to be uneventful, and Randy leaves for his social studies class, thinking that things just have to get better.

Social studies with Mr. Carter is Randy's favorite class even though Mr. Carter is a stickler for details and always expects the "right" answer. Randy sees this as a challenge, and he's especially confident today because he did his homework last night and missed only one of the questions that the teacher assigned.

Since the first question is an easy one, Randy and at least fifteen others wave their hands in the air, trying to escape getting stuck with one of the harder ones that will undoubtedly come later in the period. Larry Jones answers the easy question in a zip, and Mr. Carter goes on to the next one. Randy raises his hand to answer four different questions, and each time the teacher skips over him.

Mr. Carter finally comes to the one question that Randy couldn't answer last night. Randy crouches down in his seat, trying to make himself invisible.

"Randy?" Mr. Carter looks at him expectantly. Randy stares right back.

"Do you know the answer?" Mr. Carter prods.

"No, sir."

"It seems to me, young man, that you might do yourself a favor and finish your assignment once in a while."

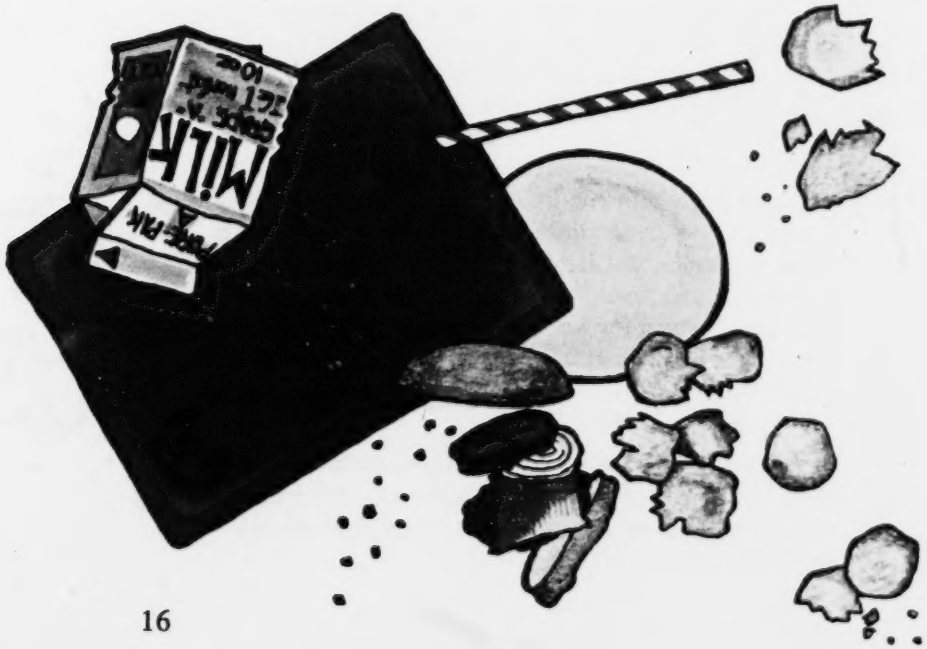
Randy sulks the rest of the period. "Just my luck! Why does it always happen to me?" he thinks to himself on the way to his next class.

After math, comes science, which is not at all Randy's favorite subject. The science teacher, Mr. Anderson, fancies himself the mentor of the next Albert Einstein. Unfortunately, at least for Randy, Mr. Anderson is bent on finding him right here in Central High. One of Mr. Anderson's standard operating procedures is to seat the most scientifically inclined, those destined to become physicians, dentists, chemists, or perhaps, graduate Ph.D.'s in physics, at the front of the class, so they have the best vantage point for all demonstrations and experiments. "After all, they are the most deserving ones, aren't they?" he justifies his actions to himself and to anyone who inquires. Randy, as you already may have guessed, sits near the back of the room. He's never said anything about it, but it does sometimes make him feel like an outsider. Mr. Anderson's previous impatience with some of Randy's questions has convinced him to be silent and hope for the best. The only really good thing about science is that lunch follows.

For many students, lunch is the highpoint of the day. Quite often, the social life of the school revolves around the hour or two that the cafeteria is open for business. Randy eats during the same period as Lisa Matthews. More boys than Randy have noticed Lisa. She's one of the most popular girls in her class, and she's seldom out of Randy's mind. He'd do just about anything to get her to notice him. Randy gets in line, and just as he moves to the serving area, she passes by him. Randy perks up, smiles, and half-waves at her, but she just gives him a cold stare and passes like an iceberg. That's not unusual—she's been doing it for weeks. You'd think he'd wise up by now, wouldn't you? Well, at least they're serving his favorite meal today—cheeseburgers, potato chips, and apple pie. The day looks brighter already.

Randy takes one of each of his favorites and two cartons of milk. He pays for his lunch and heads for the silverware section. He gets within three feet of the knives and forks when someone bumps his elbow.

His tray flies out of his hand, and its contents explode across the cafeteria floor. Half the room stands up to shout, applaud, and whistle. Randy is just too embarrassed to look anybody in the face.



After cleaning up the mess, he gets back in line, buys his second lunch, though he's lost his appetite, and manages to pick up his silverware without causing a scene. He walks carefully to the cafeteria tables. On the way, he spots Lisa again. He gives her a sheepish grin and says, "Hello." She turns to her two friends, and all three giggle as he walks away. Thoroughly embarrassed and slightly flustered again, he decides to find a seat very quickly before something else happens. He chooses a table nearby.

He doesn't know any of the guys at the table, and their unfriendly looks are hardly inviting. The boy closest to Randy asks him to move, because the seat is saved for a friend—which Randy is not, his tone implies.

As Randy gets up, he spots his locker partner Greg waving to him from across the room. Randy walks over to the table where Greg is and sits down, relieved that he can finally eat his lunch in peace. Greg avoids talking about Randy's mishap and instead encourages him to go out for football.

"You're big enough and they always need more guys. Why don't you give it a try?"

His confidence somewhat restored, Randy goes to English class and then on to shop.

After he spends the first 20 minutes just watching, Randy's partner finally lets him do some cutting on their project, but Randy's grip loosens, and he breaks the blade on the saw.

"You idiot!" Can't you do anything right? You've ruined it," Randy's partner shouts at him and pushes him out of the way. Randy readies to take a swing, but the sound of the bell cuts short his revenge, and he dashes off to Spanish class, still fuming.

Randy's Spanish teacher, Mrs. Nash, requires that all homework assignments be handed in at the beginning of the period. She scrutinizes each one, admonishing anyone who hands in an incomplete or poorly executed assignment.

Randy takes out the rumpled Spanish assignment from his notebook. There's a dirty footprint stamped on the tattered paper, a reminder of this morning's skirmish. Hesitatingly, he passes it up the aisle to the teacher. After all, a sloppy assignment is better than no assignment, he reasons. It doesn't take long for Mrs. Nash to discover Randy's messy homework.

"¿Señor Patterson, qué es ésto?" she asks, holding up the paper between her thumb and index finger as though it were contaminated. She doesn't wait for an answer and abruptly tosses it back to him. She ignores him the rest of the period, and Randy is relieved when the bell rings so he can go on to gym.

Randy heads for the football field. He sees Mr. Layton, the football coach and gym teacher, already out in the field. Mustering up all the courage he has, Randy walks over to him.

"Mr. Layton, after gym, I'd like to try out for the team."

"You've got to be kidding! I don't have enough uniforms for the guys who've already tried out. Sorry, kid, but you should have talked to me yesterday."

The coach turns to some of the other boys standing around.

"Okay, guys, let's get going. Mark, Joe, you're the captains today. Get your teams lined up."

Feeling pretty dejected, Randy joins the rest of the class. He's never really felt comfortable standing around waiting to get called. He tries to act nonchalant as the others join the ranks of a team. Finally, one of the captains, who has little sensitivity, says, "Randy, you be on my team. We need a backup for the waterboy." Some of the guys laugh, and Randy sulks away to the bench. It's his last class of the day, and he'll get to go home soon. He sits there, convinced that he'll get to play only if one of the other guys gets winded or hurt. Fine way to run a gym class, he thinks to himself.

After gym, Randy heads for home. He wears the key to the front door on a rawhide string around his neck. He lets himself into the house and listens for his mom, but the place seems a bit more quiet than usual. Then he remembers that on Mondays his mom works at the drugstore and usually doesn't get home before five. That will give him some time to watch television before the rest of the family gets home.

Just as he turns on the TV, he hears the front door slam. Robin apparently had a fight with her friend Jeanne and came straight home from school. So much for a little peace and quiet before dinner.

Robin walks into the living room, marches over to the TV, changes the channel, and perches herself in front of the set. Randy jumps up from the sofa, determined to really give it to her. She sees him coming and makes a mad dash for the stairs and locks herself in the bathroom. Well, at least he has the TV to himself again.

A few minutes later, he hears the front door open and close.

"Anybody home?" his dad calls through the hallway. He comes into the living room.

"Randy, if I've told you once, I've told you a hundred times, I don't want you watching so much TV. Sometimes I think you'd watch the test patterns if I'd let you. You ought to be outside, playing some ball, like I used to when I was a kid."

"Dad, will you get off my back?"

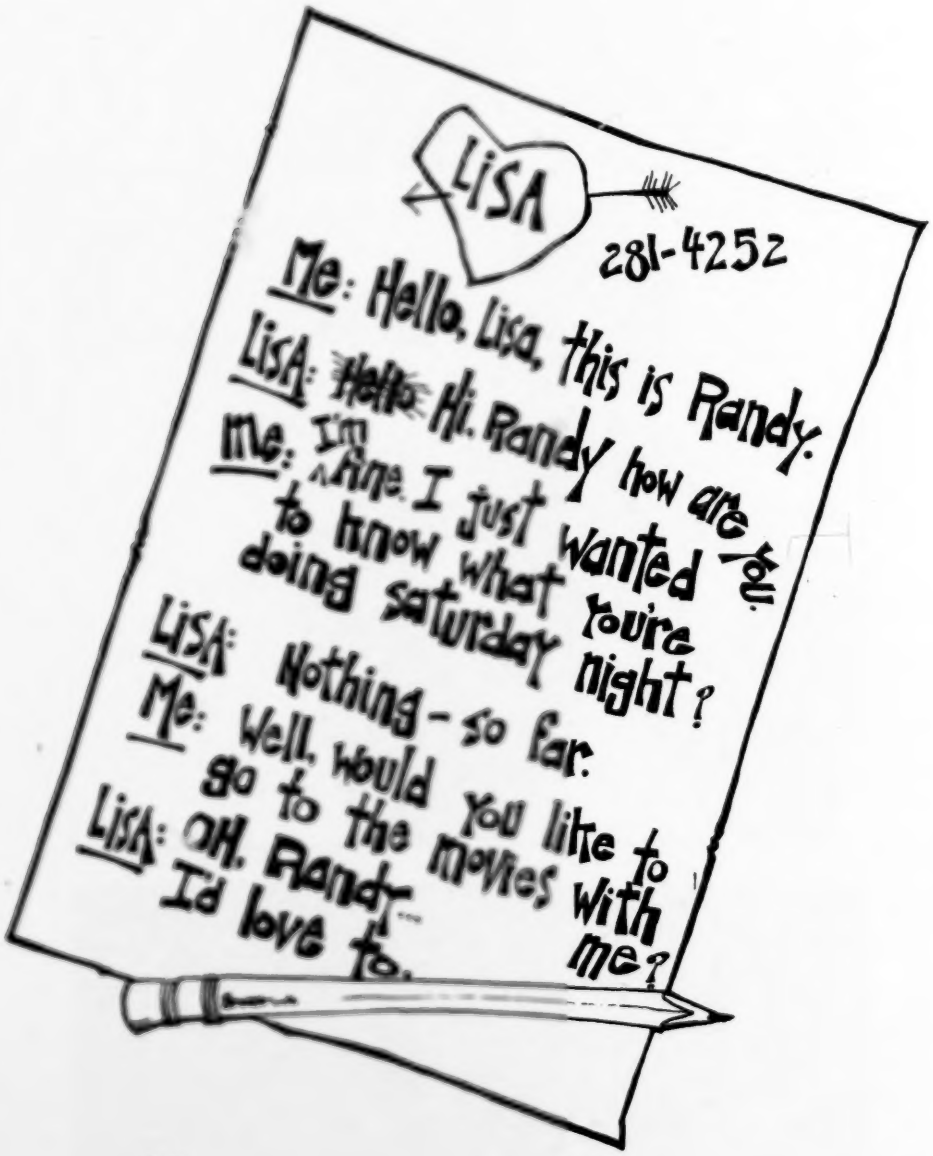
"Don't get smart with me, young man! Where's your sister?"

"I don't know."

His dad turns off the set.

"Well, if you don't want to play ball or something, why don't you clean up your room like I've been asking you for the past week or start your homework and get those grades up where they're suppose to be. You know you can't get into college or get a decent job unless you know something. What the heck is going to happen to you, anyway? Remember, I'm only saying this for your own good."

His dad leaves the room, and Randy sits on the sofa, trying to decide what to do next. Before long, he's looking up Lisa Matthews' number in the phone book. Below the number he's written on the notepad by the phone, he scribbles:


LISA
281-4252
Me: Hello, Lisa, this is Randy.
LISA: Hello Hi, Randy how are you.
Me: I'm Fine. I just wanted to know what you're doing saturday night?
LISA: Nothing - so far.
Me: Well, would you like to go to the movies with me?
LISA: OH, Randy... I'd love to.

Excited by the possibility of actually having a date with Lisa, Randy anxiously dials her number. The front door opens and closes, and his mom says hello on her way through the living room to the kitchen. The phone rings and rings, and just as he's about to hang up, he hears her voice.

"Hello."

"Hello, Lisa, this is Randy," he says with enthusiasm.

"Randy who?" she demands.

"Oh, ah, never mind. Good-bye."

His spirits completely dampened by this latest blow to his ego, Randy mopes into the kitchen to see what's for dinner. He starts poking around the pots on the stove.

"Randy, will you *please* get out from under my feet, so I can get dinner on the table?" his mother asks angrily.

Not wanting another run-in with anyone, Randy decides to make himself scarce until his mom calls him for dinner.

Dinner is pretty glum. Apparently, Randy's mom and dad had an argument, and dinner turns out to be one of those "pass the potatoes, pass the salt" meals. Afterwards, his mom deals the final blow.

"Randy, I'll expect you and Robin to do the dishes tonight."

After doing the dishes, Randy starts his history homework. It was a tough battle, but *Monday Night Football* took a back seat to Randy's desire to overcome Mr. Carter's "get-tough" attitude in class. Randy soon realizes that he's going to need help and decides to call Greg.

"Hello, Greg, this is Randy. Did you get the history questions?"

"Are you kidding, Randy? Do you know what night this is? Nobody does history when he can watch football instead. Just forget about those stupid history questions and concentrate on something important."

"Look, Greg, I'd rather watch the game, too, but I know that if I don't start to get caught up soon, I'm going to really go under fast."

"Hey, Randy, I have to go. I'll see you tomorrow. Bye."

"Bye."

Randy spends the next couple of hours laboring over the history questions. He doesn't have anybody else to call, and he really wants Mr. Carter to know that he has been trying.

"Fat chance. Mr. Carter won't even call on me tomorrow unless he knows I don't know the answer."

Randy keeps squeezing the tube of toothpaste, but nothing comes out, so he uses some soap that tastes awful. "Boy, will I be glad when this day's over."

Randy gets into bed. Right before he turns out the light, he takes off his IALAC sign, and you know what, it's about the size of a postage stamp.

Randy's day might seem somewhat strange to you, but there are kids, and adults too, who live variations of Randy's day—every day. One thing goes wrong in the morning and the whole day turns into a circus of mishaps.

What happens to Randy is that the very next day he puts on a new IALAC sign and goes out to face the world. Some days are better than others. On some days, he comes home and his sign is tattered and torn. On other days, perhaps only one or two pieces have been ripped away. On rare occasions, the sign is not only intact but also larger than it was when it was put on.

As you may have guessed, damaged IALAC signs usually outnumber the undamaged ones. Far too often, the "Randy's" of this world take a long, hard look at their IALAC signs and say to the world, "You've told me day after day that I'm not loveable or capable. Well, now I'm going to show you just how unloveable and incapable I can be. I'm going to shut myself off from everything and everybody, and what's more, you'll never catch me patching up somebody else's IALAC sign. I've had it."

The real tragedy is that it takes so little effort to help someone feel loveable and capable. What we frequently do instead is try to patch pieces of our own sign back on by ripping a piece off someone else's.

The put-down is one of the quickest and surest ways of tearing off a piece of someone's IALAC sign. Every day in homes, classrooms, offices, and the neighborhood supermarket, many of us demonstrate our amazing prowess at building ourselves up by verbally tearing someone else down. Unfortunately, we have learned to accept the put-down, or as it is sometimes called, the killer statement. To us, put-downs are as American as apple pie.

Clever statements, constructed to get a laugh from listeners, jab away at a spot the attacker thinks is most vulnerable—ethnic background, social position, sexuality, intelligence, popularity, physical appearance—all are fair game for the perpetrator of the put-down. The attacker may direct his put-down to the victim in the form of a glaring insult or perhaps via what seems to be good-natured kidding. Another effective method of delivering a put-down is by addressing the cutting words to an audience in a "stage whisper" just loud enough to let the victim know that he's the one for whom the jab is intended.

YOU'RE SO UGLY YOU HAVE TO SNEAK UP ON A MIRROR!
FATTY, FATTY, TWO-BY-FOUR CAN'T GET THRU THE KITCHEN DOOR!
IF BRAINS WERE DYNAMITE, YOU WOULDN'T HAVE ENOUGH TO BLOW YOUR NOSE!

"You can't hurt me; I'm invulnerable," the victim seems to respond with a counterattack, a shrug, or a quick exit from the scene. But anyone who watches closely knows that the put-downs hurt. The truth shows in the victim's face or eyes. But even if they don't hurt, even if the put-downs roll off as some may have us believe, they do limit a person's chances of revealing himself to others. Put-downs drive him a little more deeply into his shell. They make him unable to show that he cares, or that he can be gentle. They won't allow him to be kind. Why? Because if he dares to reveal these qualities, he knows that the put-down artist will come in like a wolf for the jugular vein.

If you doubt that the put-downs are as prevalent as I say, then spend just one day counting the number of put-downs you hear. You'll soon discover the extent to which the insults outnumber the compliments.

In our work at the Center for Humanistic Education at the University of Massachusetts, we have become more and more convinced that put-downs and other forms of personal digs do more damage than most of us imagine. Until we recognize this problem and seek out a solution, it will be very difficult for us to make any real progress in the area of human values. Most of us will continue to refuse to take the necessary risk of putting ourselves on the line and showing others that we are vulnerable. How could we if we know that the moment our defenses are down, somebody probably will tear us to pieces?

Our fears of being open, of being vulnerable are shared by many people. But, perhaps it is up to each of us to take the initiative. How do we as individuals seeking warmth and genuine relationships encourage others to join our ranks? How do we get each other to open up without forcing ourselves into an embarrassing or potentially hostile situation?

The IALAC Story is one way of approaching this problem that has met with a great deal of success. We've shared this experience with others at workshops across the country, and it has proved to be enlightening for many. The story and method are simple, the effect profound.

Just about anybody can use the IALAC Story to get across the point that people need to understand and care about one another. If you're a teacher, a minister, a parent, a supervisor, a scout leader, a bridge club hostess, or any other kind of group leader, you'll find that the IALAC Story can be easily adapted to suit your specific needs. Try it at home after dinner, or during a coffee break at the office, or on a rainy day when all of your students are crowded indoors. Try it and see how its simple message comes across.

HOW TO USE IALAC

The IALAC Story may be presented in various ways. Before your group comes together, prepare a sign, small enough to be handy but large enough so that the entire group can see it. On the sign, print the letters IALAC. Tell the story as you hold the IALAC sign up in front of you to illustrate what you are saying. As you tell the story, certain things happen to the main character which either build up his self-esteem or make him feel rejected. Depending on what effect each event has on the character, you either tear off a piece of the sign or patch a fragment back on. Within our story, these events are set off by a thumbs-up or thumbs-down drawing. The important thing is to do this without interrupting the flow of your narration. Tell the story, adding personal touches or modifications to suit your situation. Feel free to use your imagination to make the IALAC Story a unique adventure.

One teacher made an IALAC button and wore it to class. At first, she didn't tell the students what the letters stood for but she demonstrated that she was a loving and capable person through her actions. She later told the students what the letters stood for and the story. After they expressed the desire to have their own signs, she helped them make their own. They discussed what it meant to be loveable and capable, and they

dubbed this ongoing event, "IALAC talk." They even defined the opposite of a put-down to be a build-up, and in their relationships, they always tried to build up everyone to make him feel loveable and capable.

Another imaginative teacher came up with the idea that the class IALAC sign could be divided into two colors—the school colors. One side represented the school day outside of her class, the other side the time spent in her class. The students monitored the put-downs during the day. When they heard a put-down during the class, they tore a piece off one side. When they heard a put-down somewhere else, they tore off a piece from the other side. This activity can be varied, i.e., a two-color sign representing home and school. Students can then compare the put-down tallies in their homes and schools. This also is a very effective way of introducing the concept of IALAC to both parents and brothers and sisters.

You may have your students discuss how people have added to their IALAC signs. You can encourage build-ups by suggesting that students wear a couple of gummed labels around their own signs. The labels would have phrases on them that the wearer likes to hear about himself. As one's fellow students respond to these needs, the gummed labels are removed.

You might want to try some role-playing. One student acts as the perpetrator of the put-down and the second as the victim who responds defensively. The third student monitors what he thinks are the true feelings of the victim, not the ones he verbalizes but those that he'd like to show but feels he can't.

Your students might like to work with an I Am Unloveable and Incapable sign. Ironically, the purpose here is to destroy the sign. Every time something good happens, the student tears a piece from the sign. Hopefully, by the end of the day, each student will feel both loveable and capable—and will be "signless" to prove it.

Obviously, much can be done with the IALAC Story and concept. I have offered just a few suggestions. Your imagination and the individual characteristics of your classes will help you to decide the best and most effective ways of presentation and utilization. Good luck, and remember, you are loveable and capable.